

WW III: The global unconventional War on Terror

By Col. Walter Herd
U.S. Army Special Operations Command

"I want you to move into that province, oust the al Qaeda, co-opt the locals, and bring security to the region. Take as many Afghan forces as you can muster and be ready to move as soon as you can. What are your questions?"

Those were the orders I gave the Special Forces A-Team commander as he and his 12-man team moved into the Lwara District in Afghanistan during the winter of 2003/04. In short, I tasked him to conduct unconventional warfare in that region by fighting the terrorist by, with and through the indigenous forces rather than by using primarily U.S. military might.

What is unconventional warfare? The Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms Joint Publication 1-02 defines unconventional warfare as: A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominately conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes guerrilla warfare, and other direct offensive, low visibility, covert, or clandestine operations, as well as the indirect activation of subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities and evasion and escape.

The professionals, academics, historians and armchair generals we see on television generally agree that unconventional warfare is broad and that the American military has seldom executed it on a large scale.

As the former commander of the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force in Afghanistan for almost a year, I have a more personal and direct view of unconventional warfare. After reading through Joint Publications, Army Manuals and military history, I realized I learned much of what I need to know about unconventional warfare in the eighth grade. It was then that I read Mark Twain's "Tom Sawyer."

In that book, Tom Sawyer was tasked to paint the fence in front of his aunt's home. In order to accomplish this task, Tom co-opted his friends and neighborhood pals to paint the fence for him. He painted just enough himself to inspire and instruct his surrogates. In the end, the fence got painted, the whole community had bought into the project, and he did not get paint on his overalls. In a nutshell, Tom Sawyer was demonstrating unconventional warfare tactics. He was accomplishing his goal working by, with and through his community members.

In war fighting, if you are fighting by, with and through indigenous forces or if you're collecting intelligence and conducting operational preparation of the environment by, with and through indigenous forces, you're conducting unconventional warfare. Whether the job is direct action, special reconnaissance or sabotage and subversion (or even painting a fence) if the focus is on doing it by, with and through the indigenous population then it's UW.

In an unconventional war the default force of choice should always be the indigenous force. Unilateral force is only used as a last resort. Even if tactically successful, a unilateral operation may ultimately lead to failure by un-seating the very indigenous capability you are trying to build.

Unconventional warfare and the current fight

The first thing leaders must do in any situation is to grasp and define the problem. This problem (this war) is an unconventional one. It is a war that must be fought using the indirect approach. If we, the U.S. military, try too hard to win this war single-handedly, we'll lose it.

The only way to win our current war is by, with and through others. The very definition of victory in this war is when others, other nations and other cultures, police their societies properly so that those same societies aren't terrorist breeding grounds or safe havens from which terrorists can attack our homeland again. That alone dictates that this war is not a traditional maneuver war, but a global unconventional war. This type of unconventional war requires "strategic patience" by the American government as well as its people. Only the long-term approach will deliver victory.

In fact, we are conducting unconventional warfare every day in Afghanistan and Iraq. We have more than a dozen Special Forces A-Camps in Afghanistan right now. The vast majority of the actionable and reliable intelligence we have in that region comes from SF troopers working by, with and through others. In more cases than not, it is the SF-recruited, trained and advised Afghan security apparatus that is providing security, not the coalition forces.

In the Lwara Province of Afghanistan, along the Pakistani border, we tasked an SF ODA commander to build an A-Camp and conduct Unconventional Warfare: by, with and through. He took his A-Team, one company of Afghan National Army Soldiers, plus about a dozen Afghan Border Guards and an equal number of Afghan Custom Police.

Within one week of their arrival, after pre-empting several enemy attacks, they had denied that area as a safe haven from which the enemy could operate. A few months later, after an investment of their time and expertise that area voted in the national elections and is moving down the road to stability. We are enjoying success in countless other dusty valleys in the region by operating by, with and through the indigenous population.

Another great example of unconventional by, with and through operations was in early 2004, in southern Afghanistan when one of our indigenous warriors brought nearly 20 Taliban insurgents to one of our A-Camp locations.

During about a two-month period, he literally bound and gagged these terrorists and delivered them to an A-Camp in the back of his Toyota station wagon. By following this Tom Sawyer example, American Special Forces working by, with and through both indigenous individuals and indigenous military units were able to change the environmental conditions and thus to deny sanctuary to any leftover guerillas. One valley at a time, stability can spread.

There is a simple truth with insurgencies: Contented people don't revolt. So we must attack the source of the anger, and the causes of the instability with the same vigor as we attack the armed guerilla.

We are using the combination of strike operations and civic action with great success by following one simple rule: Co-opt those that you can and destroy the rest. While not the focus of the conventional army, the key to this kind of war is to attack the enemy's popular support as well as his combat forces. In order to do that, we must separate the guerilla from his support base (auxiliary and underground). This can be done kinetically, fiscally, physically, socially or even emotionally.

When we introduce security to most of the local inhabitants, they eventually buy into the overall plan. Thus, the guerilla is left alone in the cold (literally). His choices are only to fight or convert. Co-opt as many as possible by introducing a better option, and then you are left with only the unredeemable to fight. We are fighting a global unconventional war. Clearly, our way of life is at stake. Victory is defined when others are capable and motivated to secure their own lands from becoming a terrorist sanctuary. As such, our main effort must focus on facilitating by, with and through success. The end state of the bombers, the tankers and the commandos is to ultimately support those fighting this global war by, with and through the indigenous forces. If we do it alone now, we'll be it doing alone forever.



Special Forces rush onto a Chinook prior to striking a target in southern Afghanistan.